

Mix It Up! Mingle Away!

by LAURA LODER BUECHEL

Many mingling activities beyond Find Someone Who can be done for instructional purposes in the language classroom, and mingles—activities in which learners move around and talk with multiple classmates as they seek information and/or practice using specific language elements—can be used at both the lower and upper levels as well as with children and adults. The ideas below focus on the elementary-school English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, where learners begin with English when they are around nine years old. They already have a grasp on the local language and are starting to become exposed to English through music and gaming.

When I use any of the mingling activities described below, I keep in mind the following points:

- How am I introducing the language or the topic?
- How am I introducing the activity itself?
- What language structures do I have on the board as support? At what point during the mingle do I start to erase the language support or erase it entirely?
- How do learners know when it's time to change partners—do I have a bell?
- What can I observe in my learners while they are mingling?
- When do I need to stop the whole class and do some controlled drilling or practice before they continue?
- How am I making the learners responsible for listening to one another or for doing something with the information they acquired while mingling?
- What do I need to do afterwards to settle the learners down, to revise any points, or to consolidate the information?

Jokes mingle

For each learner in the class, I prepare a joke to memorize and hand out each one on a small piece of paper. (Two examples: “What do you get when you cross a snowperson with a vampire? – Frostbite!” and “Why was the skeleton sad? – It had no body to dance with!”) Generally, I have jokes on specific topics such as seasons, holidays, and school, and I search online for “+simple jokes +clean +inoffensive +kids”; there are many jokes on the web—and many sites (such as Ducksters). But understanding jokes has a lot to do with the level of the learners and, when possible, using jokes where there are parallel words in the local language.

Once the learners have memorized their joke (and often they have to use a dictionary to understand all the words), I collect the jokes because they should not be reading from the paper. Their challenge in the mingle is to tell five members of the class their joke. As they do this, they are responsible for each partner's understanding of the joke, so sometimes they translate it, and sometimes they repeat the

punch line slowly; deciding how they get their partner to understand is a good part of the challenge!

After the learners have told their joke five times, they have to find a joke they heard that they like better than their own joke and tell *that* new joke at least three times. This at times means that they have to do a few more rounds of telling their original jokes, but that depends on the class and how “quick” they are. When they go back to their seats, I often have them try to recall, in groups, as many of the jokes they heard as possible (in a class of 20 children, in groups of three they tend to be able to remember most of the jokes). In other classes that need some quiet work, I have them first fill in a grid, as shown in Figure 1, where they read and note down whether they remember the joke from the key words and whether they told it. They then go through the list out loud in small groups, trying to re-create the jokes. Thus, this activity does a lot not only for fluency but also for getting a deeper understanding of words and internalizing structures.

3-2-1 mingle

This common mingle is great for a focus on fluency. With minor tweaks, you can use it over and over again, but in slightly different ways. The general method is to first write a topic to discuss or question on the board—for instance, “What is in your backpack?” or “What do you like about your school?” Then,

learners talk to one person for three minutes about the topic. They then change partners and have two minutes to discuss the same prompt with another student. They change partners one more time and have one minute to discuss the prompt. With younger learners, I tend to use 2, 1.5, and 1 minute(s). For advanced learners, I tell them that in the second round, they must integrate something they heard from the first round (and if it was something in a classmate’s backpack, they have to find out what is *not* in each other’s backpack, but *is* in someone else’s backpack). You can also use this mingle at the end of a lesson, when the prompt might be, “Discuss everything you did in the lesson today” or “Retell the story you heard in today’s lesson.” This can be done for formative evaluation so you know what you have to pick up on again in a subsequent lesson. In fact, for formative purposes, I use this moment to note down observations on my record-keeping sheet so I have evidence for report cards on who is speaking fluently and who got the content of the lesson. This activity builds confidence and fluency and is quite versatile!

Two Truths and a Lie (Fib) mingle

This mingle is similar to the 3-2-1 mingle and is well known in the English language classroom, yet I have mostly experienced Two Truths and a Lie as an introductory activity in a new group. There are, however, many more ways of using it. Generally, in advance, learners write down their statements. The statements can be:

Joke about ...	Heard?	Told?
• fences and cemeteries		
• fat jack-o’-lanterns		
• skeletons crossing roads		
• laughing monsters		
• skeletons and spicy food		
• mummies as employees		
• comedians and Halloween		
• witch stew		
• mummies and vacation		

Figure 1. Example grid for joke consolidation

- personal, so learners get to know one another (I am Italian. / I have two dogs. / I have two cats.)
- designed for practicing a particular tense (I have never been to Zimbabwe. / I have never seen an elephant. / I have never eaten kangaroo.)
- about a story the learners are working on (The Three Little Pigs were siblings. / The Three Little Pigs had three different houses. / The Three Little Pigs were on a diet.)
- definitions of words students are learning (An apple is a fruit. / Milk comes from chickens. / Apples grow on trees.)
- from a picture prompt: learners describe two things they see and one they don't from the same picture.

After students write these statements, they have to memorize them (the teacher can always walk around and correct). After the statements have been memorized (there are many memorization strategies you can use, such as covering the paper up from the end and repeating it over and over again), I have the learners hand in their statements to me. Now the mingle begins! The learners stand up and find a partner, and each says their statements to their partner. On the board I tend to write, "The first/second/third one is wrong" and "That's right" and "No, guess again!" After each person has told their partner their statements, they swap partners. Depending on what comes next, students can take time to quietly write down any new facts or all the correct sentences they can remember.

Find-your-partner picture mingle

In this activity, I have a set of pictures that are similar, such as pictures of fruit salad. In one picture, the fruit salad consists of apples, berries, and oranges. In another picture, the fruit salad has apples, berries, and bananas. There are different ways to do this activity, and I often use it to create random partners.

If you have a class of 20 learners, you need ten pictures (you can also split your group in half if you have a larger class; you will just need one picture per pair). First, in pairs, learners receive one picture and write short descriptions of the picture as a collaborative activity. You can always put language support on the board. If you want to be sneaky, the pictures should all be the same size, and the paper the learners write on should be the same color and size as the paper with the picture on it. Then, you gather both the pictures and the descriptions. Now you have 20 pieces of paper, half with pictures and half with text. Redistribute the pictures and the written descriptions randomly to individual students. Give the learners a minute to memorize what they have. Then, they put down the paper and mingle to find their partner; conversations might sound something like this:

A: "My fruit salad has apples, berries, and bananas in it."

B: "My fruit salad also has apples, berries, and bananas in it!"

A: "My fruit salad is in a glass bowl."

B: "Oh, mine is in a blue bowl."

They mingle until they find a match. Then, they can check the originals (I often have them leave their pictures and texts at their desks and do this at the front of the room so it's easier to check afterwards).

A second version of this mingle is to have two pictures that are the same. So in a class of 20, there are ten pictures, printed twice. Hand out a picture to each learner. Have the learner write a description on a post-it of what is in their picture. They need to leave their pictures at their desks, and they mingle with the post-its until they find their partners. Once they have read what they had written, they can check their pictures. A simple search with Google Images using terms such as "fruit salad" or "zoo animals" or "rain forest scene" will lead you to many pictures that are similar.

This activity could also be done as a drawing activity, where learners are given descriptions of pictures (“In your picture, some fruit salad is in a blue bowl. There are apples, cherries, and bananas.”). Two learners should be given the same text so there are two pictures of the same things. Then, the processes from above can be repeated, but this time with the learners’ own drawings. However, I am not so keen on drawing in the classroom because learners should be manipulating language, and thus one could as well have the learners create concrete poetry as shown in Figure 2; this could act as the picture.

One-minute speech mingles

In this mingle, start by having the learners find a partner. One person talks for one minute. Then, their partner talks for one minute. After this, they mingle and do the same thing with a different partner. But there is no reason for doing this without a purpose for listening! Thus, I tend to use the following ideas with my elementary-school learners:

1. Describe everything you see in the classroom. Your partner counts. If you said 15 things this time, then the next time, after you change partners, you have to say 20 and include something your first partner said. Afterwards, you write down everything you said or heard!
2. Again describe everything you see in the classroom, but you have to say something that is incorrect—did your partner listen to find out? The partner can indicate something is wrong during the speech by holding up their hand, or after the speech they can say something like, “I heard you say _____. That was wrong!” The speaker can respond, “Yes! You got me!” or “There’s one more!”
3. Picture yourself at the local grocery store (take a minute to picture it). Then, one partner lists everything they can see but has to throw in a word in a language *other* than English—but with a British/

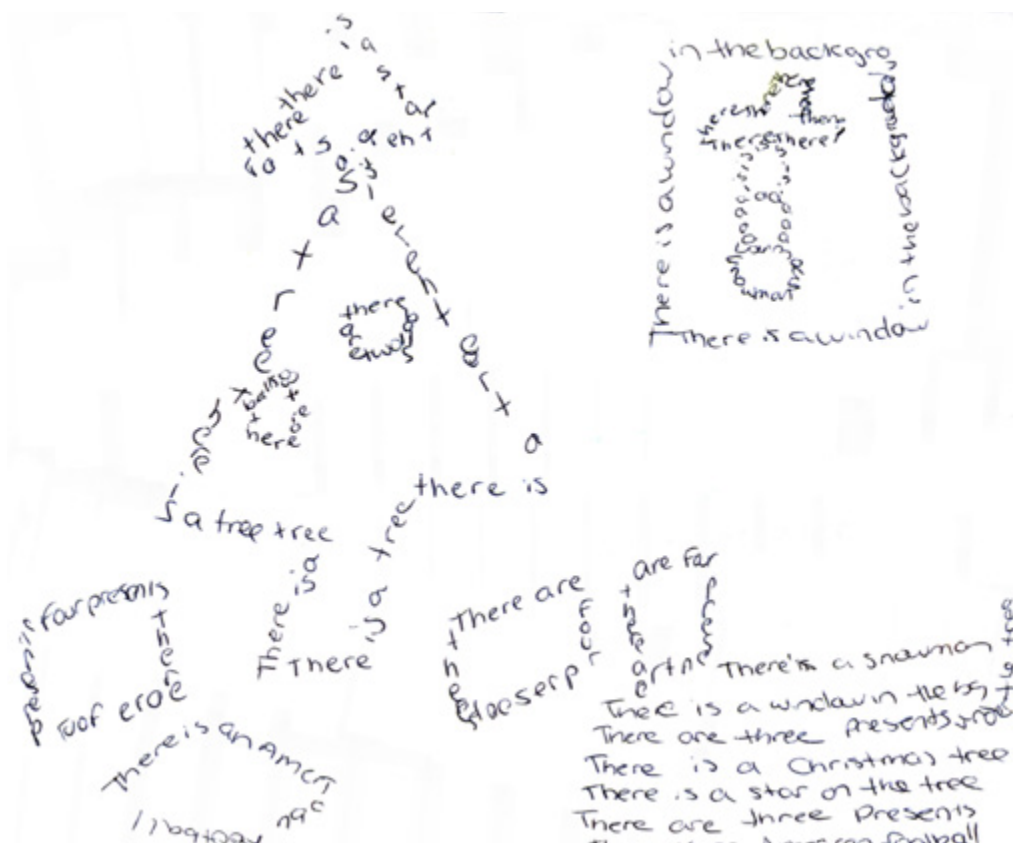


Figure 2. Sample of concrete poetry

Mingles offer short movement breaks that can provide the teacher with evidence of learner fluency and range of vocabulary—and mingles are simply just fun.

American accent. The listener has to see if they noticed it!

Compliments mingle

On the board, I write a 3x3 grid of colors that the learners copy down. They then walk around and give nine different compliments to nine different classmates—“I love your blue shirt!” On the grid that they have copied, they write down their classmate’s name and the article of clothing or a key word or phrase from the compliment. This game is described here: <https://www.tesol.org/read-and-publish/bookstore/teaching-with-games> (Buechel 2020). Some adaptations might be as follows:

- Write a grid of positive attributes (*lovely smile ... kindness ... sense of humor*).
- Focus on vocabulary items you are stuck on (“How do you say *chuchichestli* in English? ... Thank you. You are so helpful!”).
- Have students look at the tags on their clothing. Fill the grid with country names. Learners walk around and say, “I love your T-shirt! Where was it made?” If the shirt was made in India, and the asker has “India” on their grid, then they can take note.

There are many more mingle activities, such as mingles with a single word on a card to practice a structure (e.g., a country name on a card to have the learners practice “Have you ever been to ... ?”), where each time learners ask a question of a person, they then swap cards with that person. There are Find Someone Who lists and bingos that can also be used as mingles. I’ve had classes that were too wild for such activities, but mingles offer short movement breaks that can provide the teacher with evidence of learner fluency and range of vocabulary—and mingles are simply

just fun. Mingles can be used for assessment purposes at the end of a unit or to get an idea of what learners know already at the start of a unit. Furthermore, depending on the mingle, you can note down observations that might be part of a standards-based reporting system; for instance, mingles can reveal whether learners can fluently and accurately describe an event that happened to them in the past, whether they have mastered a particular structure, or whether they can retell what they read in a text.

Mingles, generally, are great activities for many of the mediation descriptors found in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (see North and Piccardo 2016). Don’t be afraid to try them with younger learners, as most of these examples do not always involve free speaking, but come with language support and preparation. As a result, there is a lot of controlled language practice in a seemingly “free” environment, which can be motivating to all. Enjoy!

REFERENCES

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